

# Oral Health in Older Adults

## Issue Brief

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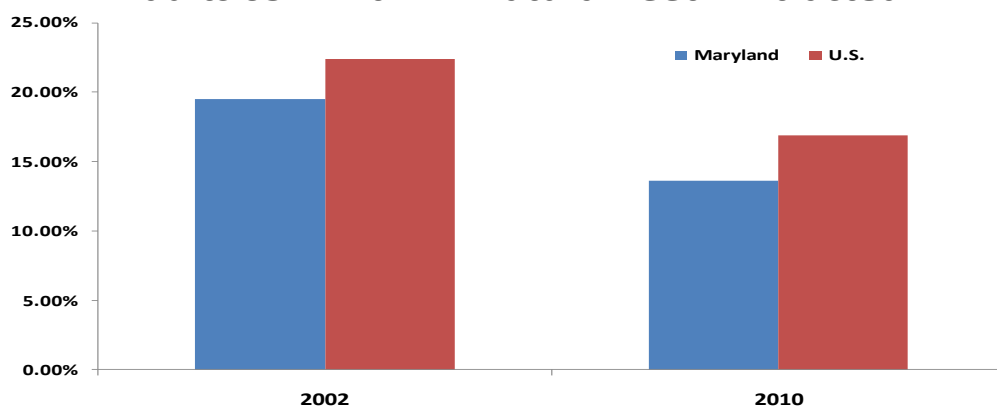
### ORAL HEALTH IMPORTANCE

People are living longer and staying healthy longer than in the past. Older adults are more likely to maintain healthy, natural teeth than they were a decade ago. However, studies indicate that older people have the highest rates of gum disease and need to do more to maintain good oral health.

There is a strong relationship between oral health and overall physical health. How teeth age depends on their care over the years. Older adults should continue to focus on prevention of cavities and gum disease.

For all ages, it's important for individuals to keep their mouths clean, healthy and feeling good. It is also important for all adults to be especially aware of maintaining healthy gums.

#### Adults 65+ With All Natural Teeth Extracted



Source: National Oral Health Surveillance System. Oral Health Indicators, 2011

### RISK FACTORS

If gum disease goes undetected, it can be detrimental. It is primarily caused by plaque but there are other factors that may increase the risk and severity of the condition including:

- Food left between the teeth
- Smoking
- Smokeless tobacco use
- Poorly aligned teeth
- Poorly fitted partial dentures or bridges
- Poor diets
- Systemic diseases (e.g. anemia)

### WARNING SIGNS

The good news is that oral diseases can be stopped! Make sure to look for these warning signs and visit a dentist immediately if these symptoms are present::

- Bleeding gums while brushing
- Tender, red or swollen gums
- Gums that have pulled away from the teeth
- Pus between teeth and gums when the gums are pressed
- Any change in bite
- Any change in the fit of partial dentures
- Constant bad taste or bad breath

## MEDICATION SIDE EFFECTS

Older adults often take medications that can impact oral health and affect dental treatment. Hundreds of common medications can cause side effects such as dry mouth, soft tissue changes, taste changes, and gingival overgrowth. Some of these include:

- Antihistamines
- Diuretics
- pain killers
- high blood pressure medications
- Antidepressants

Be sure to tell your dental professional about any medications that you are taking, including herbal remedies and over-the-counter medications.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

### Watch Out for Receding Gums

Even if you've managed to avoid periodontal (gum) disease until now, it is especially important to practice a meticulous oral care routine as you age. Receding gum tissue affects a large percentage of older people. This condition exposes the roots of teeth and makes them more vulnerable to decay and infection.

### Maintenance Is Important

To keep your teeth for a lifetime, you must remove the plaque from your teeth and gums every day with proper brushing and flossing. Regular dental visits are also important. Daily cleaning will help keep calculus formation to a minimum, but it won't completely prevent it. A professional cleaning at least twice a year is necessary to remove calculus from places your toothbrush and floss may have missed.

### Coping With Other Co-Morbidities

If you have dexterity problems or a physical disability, you may find it difficult to use your toothbrush or dental floss. Your dentist can suggest options such as an electric toothbrush or floss holder or a toothbrush with a larger handle.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.ada.org/OralLongevity.aspx>  
<http://www.ada.org/2880.aspx>  
<http://www.ada.org/6098.aspx?currentTab=2>  
<http://www.perio.org/consumer/smileforlife.htm>  
<http://www.oda.on.ca/oral-health-a-aging.html>

## DRY MOUTH

Dry mouth is a common side effect of medication. It leaves the mouth without enough saliva to wash away food and neutralize plaque, leaving you more susceptible to tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease. In addition, dry mouth can cause sore throat, problems with speaking, difficulty swallowing and hoarseness. Your dentist or periodontist can recommend various methods to restore moisture, including sugarless gum, oral rinses or artificial saliva products.

**Medications have side effects that contribute to tooth and gum disease**

**Receding Gum Tissue affects the majority of older adults...**

**At least 50% of people over age 55 have Periodontal (gum) disease**

**Almost 1 in 4 people age 65 and older have lost ALL of their teeth**